National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management
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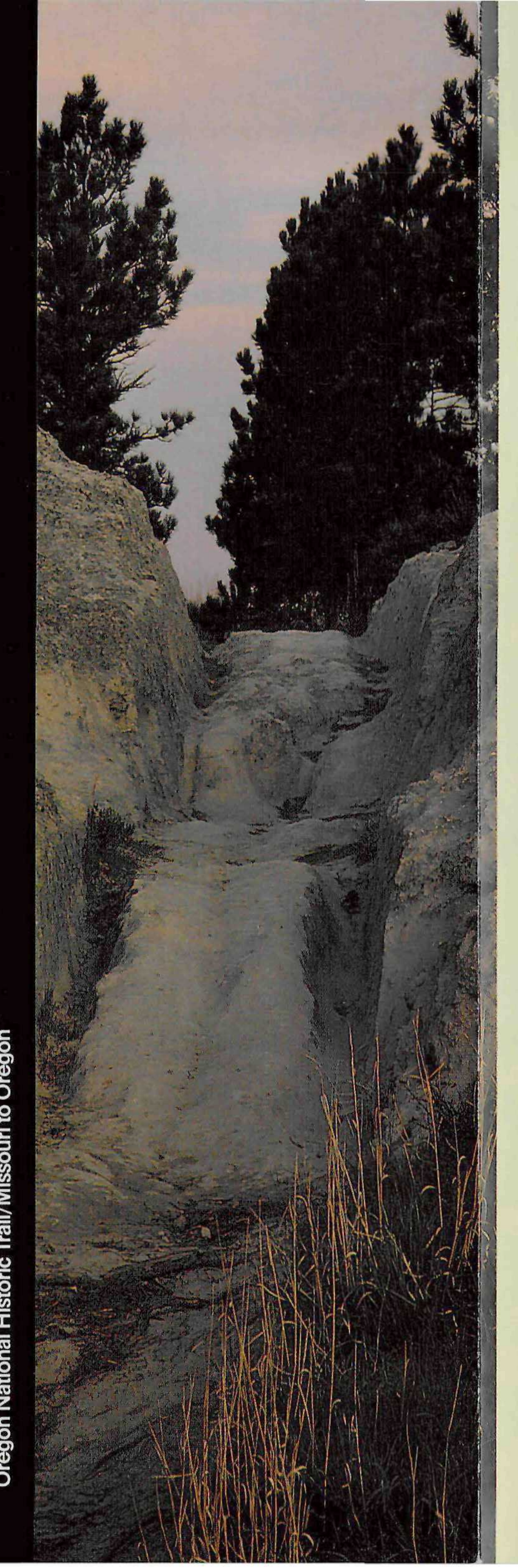


Oregon Trail

Oregon National Historic Trail/Missouri to Oregon

"When you start over these wide plains, let no one leave dependent on his best friend for any thing; for if you do, you will certainly have a blow-out before you get far." John Shively, 1846

On to Oregon! It all began with a crude network of rutted traces across the land from the Missouri River to the Willamette River that was used by nearly 400,000 people. Today the 2,170-mile Oregon Trail still evokes an instant image, a ready recollection of the settlement of this continent, of the differences between American Indians and white settlers, and of new horizons. In 1840 only three states existed west of the Mississippi River. Maine's boundary with Canada was undefined. The western boundaries of the Nation lay roughly along the Continental Divide. Within 10 years the United States and Great Britain had drawn a boundary that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The western boundary moved from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. In another 40 years successive waves of emigrants completely eliminated any sense of frontier, changed the way of life of the American Indians, and ravaged many wild animal species, especially the herds of buffalo. Plows and barbed wire subdued the prairies. Transcontinental railroads knitted the great distances together.

The first Europeans to see the trans-Mississippi West were the mountain men, trappers, and the maritime explorers along the west coast. In Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company fur frontier was approaching the Columbia River basin. In 1812 John Jacob Astor established Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia in a countermove and sent Robert Stuart overland to carry dispatches east. Stuart found South Pass by following a Crow Indian trail. Only 7,000 feet above sea level, with easy gradients, South Pass has an attractive geographic proximity to the upper reaches of the Platte River. Both were determining factors in the routing of the Oregon Trail. The early frontiersmen found the passes, crossed the great rivers, and defined the vast reaches of the western interior. From the beginning these explorers contributed to a growing campaign to make the Oregon Country a part of either the United States or Great Britain, according to their own sometimes confused loyalties.

Economic depressions in 1837 and 1841 frustrated farmers and businessmen alike. The collapse of the international fur trade in 1839 intensified the hard times, and concerns of British domination of the Northwest grew. At the same time, eastern churches saw the American Indians of the Oregon Country as ready candidates for European ideas of civilization. Churches formed ardent missionary societies to create an active appetite for Christianity. In 1836 Marcus Whitman and his new wife, Narcissa, along with Henry and Eliza Spalding, headed for Oregon as missionaries. The letters they sent home publicized the opportunities and advantages of Oregon. Many people for many reasons had become interested in Oregon, but it was not until 1841 that the first group with serious intent to emigrate left the banks of the Missouri River and headed west. In 1843, nearly 1,000 completed the trip—an omen of the multitudes to follow.

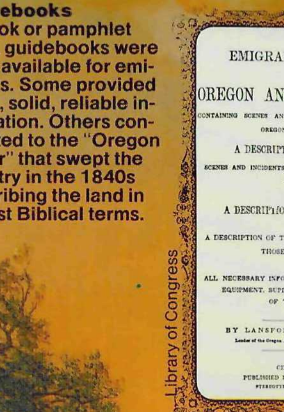
The Oregon Trail was never a clearly defined track. In places the wagons passed in columns that might be hundreds of yards apart; those traces shifted with the effects of weather and use. In the course of time nature obliterated many of the fainter traces. Road builders followed the deeper, more permanent traces because they marked the best route. The Oregon Trail was quickly being forgotten. In 1906, 76-year-old Ezra Meeker, Oregon settler in 1852 and a tireless champion of the trail, set out in a covered wagon to retrace the route from west to east. Among his goals: to create a general interest in marking the route, to raise public awareness of the trail's history and heritage, and to point out the loss and damage resulting from careless disregard. Meeker met with Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge, testified before Congress, and made several other publicity trips over the trail before his death in 1928. Today the National Park Service, in concert with the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, and the states of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington strive to protect this legacy.

Alfred Jacob Miller, *Louis-Rocky Mountain Trapper,* Buffalo Bill Historical Center

Cover: Oregon Trail wagon ruts near Guernsey, Wyoming
Glenn Van Nimwegen

Across the Plains

Guidebooks
In book or pamphlet form, guidebooks were soon available for emigrants. Some provided good, solid, reliable information. Others contributed to the "Oregon Fever" that swept the country in the 1840s describing the land in almost Biblical terms.



Library of Congress

Each part of the journey had its difficulties. For the first third of the way, the emigrants got used to the routine and work of travel. They learned to hitch and unhitch their livestock, to keep the wagons in good running order, and to make sure that their animals got the water and food they needed to survive. They learned to get along with their fellow emigrants, to agree on rules they would all follow on the journey, and to set up and break camp every night and morning. They learned to spread out in several columns so that they raised less dust and fewer of them had to breathe the choking air. They rotated positions in the line in a spirit of fairness. They learned to travel six out of seven days as experienced voices told them that some of the most difficult sections to travel would come at the end, when they would have to cross mountains before the winter snows. Fortunately the landscape was relatively gentle as they traveled through the Platte River Valley heading for the High Plains. Starting in the spring, too, provided them with abundant grass for the livestock. Water was also plentiful, and if they were early enough in the year campsites and waterholes would not be overgrazed or fouled. Cholera, whose cause was then unknown (but we now know can be traced to contaminated water), killed more travelers than anything else. How many emigrants died along the trail can never be known. The number of deaths varied from year to year. Most likely the death rate was little different from that for those who resisted the lure of the trail with all its potential disasters.

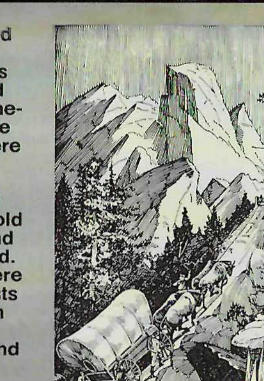
Illustration by Robert Hynes

Loading the Wagon
Wagons usually measured 4 feet wide by 12 feet long. Into these 48 square feet were put supplies for traveling the trail and the wherewithal for beginning a new life. The emphasis was on tools and food, but a few family treasures and heirlooms were also carried. A typical load is shown at left. Using the wagon as shelter was almost an afterthought.

Albert Bierstadt, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains,* The National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Over the Continental Divide

Excitement abounded when the emigrants passed the landmarks of Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff, about one-third of the way on the trail. It meant they were making progress. By this time, too, they would have an idea if their money would hold out. Tolls at ferries and bridges had to be paid. Supplies and food were bought at trading posts along the way or from other emigrants. A week's journey beyond Scotts Bluff brought them to Fort Laramie, the great supply depot and resting place. Here



they could replenish dwindling stocks of food and other staples—for a price. Wheels could be repaired and wagon boxes tightened before they set out on the steepening ascent to the Continental Divide. Water—and grass for livestock—became more scarce. The drier air caused wooden wheels to shrink and the iron tires that held the wheels together loosened or rolled off. Buffalo herds on which the emigrants had depended for fresh meat to supplement their staples became increasingly hard to find the farther west they went. Cooking fuel, whether wood or buffalo chips, was also harder to find. To lighten their wagons, the emigrants left treasured pieces of furniture and other personal belongings by the wayside. Surviving the trip had become of paramount importance; food and tools were vital, heirlooms were not. From Fort Laramie to Fort Bridger, on the western edge of present-day Wyoming, the Mormon Trail flowed with the Oregon and California trails. At Fort Bridger the emigrants parted ways as those bound for Oregon turned northwest toward the Snake River Valley. Alternate routes included Sublette's Cutoff and the Lander Cutoff. Beginning just west of South Pass, Sublette's Cutoff crossed a barren, arid stretch of country where for 50 miles there was no water and little grass. Those who chose the grueling route and survived had saved 85 miles and a week of travel.

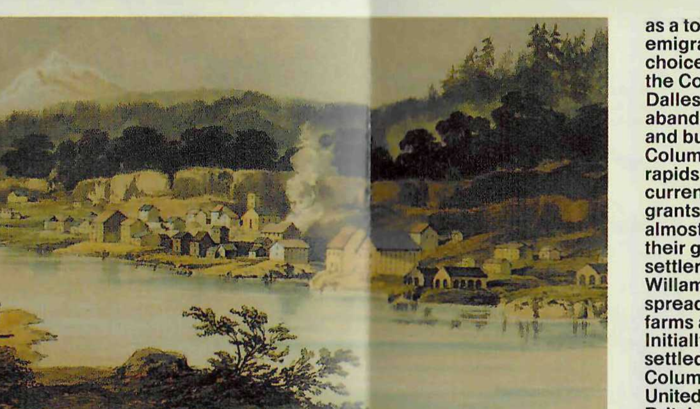
Charles Bird King, *Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees,* 1821. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Emigrant and Indian
Early emigrants generally found the Indians they encountered to be cordial and helpful. Some never even saw any Indians. As emigrant numbers multiplied, however, the friendly relationships became strained. Hostilities and casualties occurred often enough after 1860 to keep both sides nervous when emigrant wagons crossed Indian lands. Wise members of both groups made an effort to avoid trouble, and they usually succeeded. Rather than fight, Indians often assisted emigrant parties on the way west. Countless instances of assistance in the form of extra wagon teams, food, and medical help were provided by Indians, who served as trail guides and pilots at dangerous crossings. Indian life was affected radically by the emigrants, who brought disease and killed the wild game. And despite popular fiction, emigrants circled their wagons to corral their livestock rather than to ward off Indian attack.

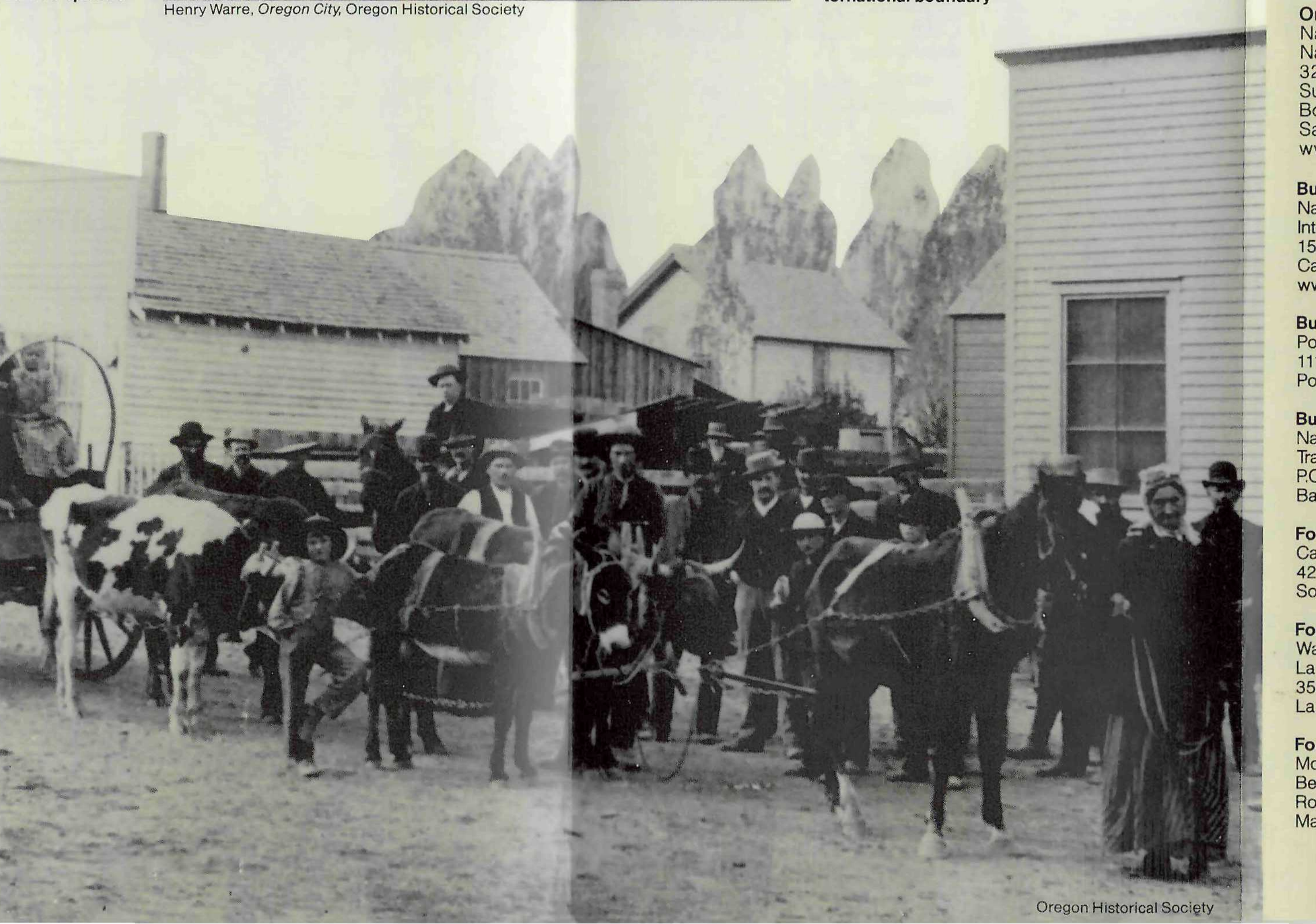
William Henry Jackson, *Wagon Train at Independence Rock,* Denver Public Library, Western History Department

Trail's End

Footsore, weary, and exhausted, traveler and beast alike faced the final third and the most difficult part of the trail. Yet speed was of the essence, for winter snows could close mountain passes or trap unprepared and tired groups of emigrants as they crossed both the Blue Mountains in eastern Oregon and the Cascades to the west. The photograph below shows a family entering Baker City, just east of the Blue Mountains, about 1864. In the early years, before the Barlow Road across the Cascades was opened as a toll road in 1846, emigrants had no choice but to go down the Columbia from The Dalles on a raft or abandon their wagons and build boats. The Columbia was full of rapids and dangerous currents; many emigrants lost their lives, almost within sight of their goal. Once the settlers arrived in the Willamette Valley they spread out to establish farms and small towns. Initially, few emigrants settled north of the Columbia, but once the United States and Great Britain agreed on an international boundary and the Hudson's Bay Company moved its post at Fort Vancouver to Vancouver Island, Americans settled in present-day Washington as well. The 1850 census showed that 12,093 people lived in Oregon. Ten years later, when Oregon had been a state for one year, 52,495 were counted. Small towns were on the verge of becoming cities. Frame houses replaced log cabins. Orchards grew to maturity. The land was acquiring the look of civilization that the emigrants had left behind.



Henry Warre, *Oregon City,* Oregon Historical Society



Oregon Historical Society

Exploring the Oregon Trail

The Oregon National Historic Trail, designated by Congress in 1978, is administered by the National Park Service in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, state and local governmental units, citizen organizations, and numerous private individuals whose property the trail crosses. Today the trail corridor contains some 300 miles of discernible ruts and 125 historic sites. An auto route can be followed from Independence, Mo., to Oregon City, Ore. For further information contact any one of these offices:

Oregon National Historic Trail
National Park Service
National Trails System – SLC
324 South State Street
Suite 200
Box 30
Salt Lake City, UT 84111
www.nps.gov/oreg

Bureau of Land Management
National Historic Trails
Interpretive Center
1501 N. Poplar Street
Casper, WY 82601
www.blm.gov

Bureau of Land Management
Pocatello Resource Area Office
1111 North 8th Avenue
Pocatello, ID 83201-5789

Bureau of Land Management
National Historic Oregon
Trail Interpretive Center
P.O. Box 987
Baker City, OR 97814

Forest Service
Caribou National Forest
421 West Second South
Soda Spring, ID 83276

Forest Service
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest
La Grande District
3502 Highway 30
La Grande, OR 97850

Forest Service
Mount Hood National Forest
Bear Springs Ranger District
Route 1, Box 222
Maupin, OR 97037

National Frontier Trails Museum
318 West Pacific
Independence, MO 64050

Oregon-California Trail Association
524 South Osage Street
P.O. Box 1019
Independence, MO 64051-0519
www.octa-trails.org

For information about the specific states, write to the appropriate address:

Idaho Department of Commerce, Tourism Promotion
700 West State Street
Boise, ID 83720-2700

Kansas Division of Travel and Tourism
700 SW Harrison, Suite 1300
Topeka, KS 66603

Missouri Division of Tourism
P.O. Box 1055
Jefferson City, MO 65102

Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Travel and Tourism Division
P.O. Box 98907
Lincoln, NE 68509

Oregon Tourism Division
775 Summer Street, NE
Salem, OR 97310

Washington State Department of Trade and Economic Development, Tourism Development Division
P.O. Box 42500
Olympia, WA 98504-2500

Wyoming Division of Tourism
I-25 at College Drive
Cheyenne, WY 82002

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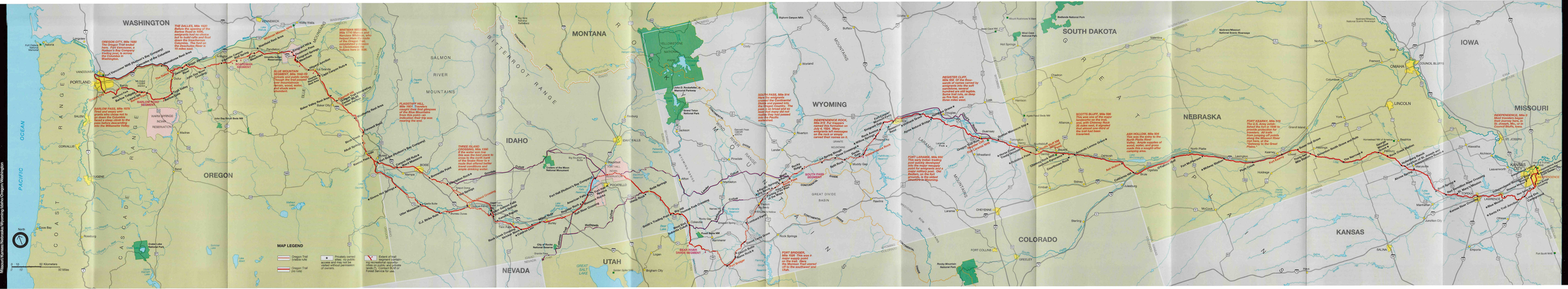
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Missouri/Kansas/Nebraska/Wyoming/Idaho/Oregon/Washington